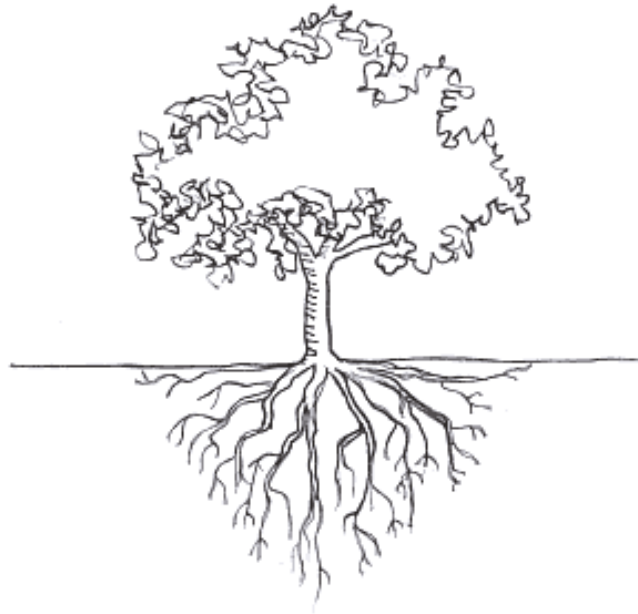


Praying Together in this Season of Growth



A Season of Prayer January 23 – February 20

Men's Prayer: Friday, February 4th @ 6:15 am @ the Hand's house
 Friday, February 18th @ 6:15 am @ the Hand's house

Sunday Mornings: Each Sunday @ 9:25 am @ the Ribbon Mill in the main room

Comm. Groups: January 30 and February 13

How can I best use this guide?

This guide is an attempt to help lead us as a community into a season of prayer for the community of Engage. The prayers and reflections can be used in a number of ways. We encourage you to commit to pray individually and communally – either through one of the offered times or with a group of 2-3 friends of your choosing. This guide is in no way conclusive. I encourage you to let it be a starting point to invite God to stir up a sense of calling and vision in your own heart as we reflect on how we can deepen the roots of our community.

Who am I praying for?

Engage is entering our third year of ministry. We're grateful for God's grace and provision that's brought us to year three and realistic about the financial and spiritual challenges we'll face in the year ahead. We want to invite you to be praying for the community of Engage and its leaders as we seek God's continued provision and direction. We also invite you to be praying for yourself – the work that God wants to do through Engage begins with the works that God's doing in each of our lives – how do you need God's provision in the year ahead, where do you need a clearer sense of God's direction? Also, pray for your families and extended communities.

What should I pray about?

Looking at the ways God has been working in our lives and communally over the last three months, we've established four areas of focus:

Trust: Asking God to deepen our trust.

Renewal: Praying that leaders and servers will be renewed and new leaders/servers will be added.

Reconciliation: Praying that relationships will be deepened and, if needed, restored.

Response: Asking God to show us each how we're being called to respond to his great love and mercy (in service, in financial sacrifice, and in discipleship).

This Sunday (23rd), the sermon title is “When you believe in God, but don’t Know Him.” It’s hard to trust someone you don’t know – in fact it’s stupid to. Knowing someone – in character, background, experience and motives is a healthy prerequisite for trust. Trust or distrust is usually built up gradually over a period of time and based on an accumulation of experiences.

Food for thought:

How well do you know God? Do you know God well enough to have reason to trust him?

Exercise:

Make a list of experiences in your life where you sensed God’s involvement – list experiences that helped to build trust and those that broke your trust in God. Spend some time in prayer with that list. Be honest with God about your areas of distrust. Ask God to help you know him better so that trust can be rebuilt. Consider talking with a trusted friends about times you feel God let you down or broke trust with you.

Passages:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:14-21

Paul prays that the Ephesians will know the fullness of God’s love that’s revealed in Jesus – in knowing that love, they know God. The knowledge of God’s love results in trust.

Prayer:

God, help me to know you. Reveal your ways to me, so I can grow to trust you more. Help Engage to be a community that’s compelled by our knowledge of who you are. Shape us in your image that as we reflect your love others might grow to trust in you.

Amen.

We need to know God in order to trust him. But we also need to trust in God's knowledge of us – are we willing to let God see and know all of us? Or are there parts of ourselves we'd prefer to keep hidden? Brennan Manning writes the following in his book, *Ruthless Trust*,

In order to grow in trust, we must allow God to see us and love us precisely as we are. The best way to do that is through prayer. As we pray, the unrestricted love of God gradually transforms us. We open ourselves to receive our own truth in the light of God's truth. The Spirit opens our eyes to see what really is, to pierce through illusions so that we can discover we are seen by God with a gaze of love.

Food for thought:

Henri Nouwen wrote that praying is “primarily listening to the blessing.” Manning also has a positive view of what happens in prayer. How does this compare to your experience? Do you experience God's loving presence when you pray or feelings of shame and regret?

Manning suggests that in prayer, we “receive our own truth in the light of God's truth.” How does the truth of God's love and forgiveness for you change the way you see the good and bad truths about yourself?

Passages:

We ourselves have put our trust in God's love toward ourselves. 1 John 4:16

Prayer: (by Brennan Manning) Try praying the following prayer daily for a week. Cut it out and put it on your fridge or mirror as a reminder.

Abba, into your hands I entrust my body, mind, and spirit and this entire day – morning, afternoon, evening and night. Whatever you want of me, I want of me, falling into you and trusting in you in the midst of my life. Into your heart I entrust my heart, feeble, distracted, insecure, uncertain. Abba, unto you I abandon myself in Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Try praying this prayer for Engage.

Brennan Manning says in his book, *Ruthless Trust*, that Jesus didn't merely ask the disciples to trust him, but demanded it of them, "Trust in God, trust also in me" (John 14:1). Trust is essential to discipleship. Not because it brings the clarity we so desperately desire. Not because it guarantees a positive outcome. But precisely because we lack clarity and face hardship. Trust is essential if we're to remain committed to following Jesus. Brennan Manning tells the following story,

When the brilliant ethicist John Kavanaugh went to work for three months at the "house of the dying" in Calcutta, he was seeking a clear answer as to how best to spend the rest of his life. On the first morning there he met Mother Teresa. She asked, "And what can I do for you?" Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him.

"What do you want me to pray for?" she asked. He voiced the request that he had borne thousands of miles from the United States: "Pray that I have clarity."

She said firmly, "No, I will not do that." When he asked her why, she said, "Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of." When Kavanaugh commented that she always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, "I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God."

Manning goes on to observe, "Our trust does not bring final clarity on this earth. It does not still the chaos or dull the pain or provide a crutch. When all else is unclear, the heart of trust says, as Jesus did on the cross, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." Luke 23:46

Food for Thought:

Are there areas in your life where you cling to clarity? What might it look like to trust God with those areas?

Passages:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Proverbs 3:5-6

Put your trust in the Lord, be strong, let your heart be bold, put your trust in the Lord."

Psalm 27:14

Prayer: God, teach me to walk by faith, not by sight. Teach me to trust in you. Help us as a church to step out in faith when we sense your leading and to trust that you'll provide for our needs. Amen.

If there's one word churches fear most it's "burnout." Wikipedia says burnout is "a psychological term for the experience of long-term exhaustion and diminished interest." Burnout can at times seem inevitable – a pandemic of sorts, against which there's no known vaccination. One thing's for sure, when we start feeling burnt out, it's a wake-up call – something needs to change, and quickly.

A common mistake is to think that ministry, service and self-sacrifice, inevitably lead to burnout. This would be a grim picture for anyone hoping to have a fruitful life of ministry. The reality is that burnout isn't a product of ministry (fruitfulness), rather a product of ministry that's not well supported. Imagine a lush grape vine producing sweet plump grapes. Now imagine what happens to that vine when it's cut off from the rest of the plant. The fruit begins to dwindle as the vine eeks out the last of the nutrients it has left. Burnout.

Our best defense against burnout is to be rooted in Jesus.

Passages:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. John 15:1-11

Food for thought:

Spend some time evaluating your life. How well are you doing at drawing strength and encouragement from Jesus? Are there areas where you're trying to produce fruit without relying on God?

Prayer:

God, our lives are filled with work and we value productivity. Forgive us for the ways we try to produce fruit without your support. Heal the damage causes to ourselves and others. Help us to stay deeply rooted in your love. Help us as a church to support one another and help each other to grow deep roots. Teach us to see our times of burnout as a call to grow deeper in you. Help us to encourage and support those who feel a call to new levels of ministry and commitment. Encourage those who need to take a time of rest. Amen.

Psalm 1 paints the picture of a follower of Jesus as being like a tree planted by streams of water. The tree is fruitful and prosperous and benefits because of its good location and also benefits others.

Passage:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper. Psalm 1:1-3

Food for Thought:

What kind of things are those who are “blessed” doing and not doing? This psalm was written in a very dry region of the world – access to water made an absolute difference for crops. How does the tree in the psalm benefit from being near a stream? How might such a tree benefit others?

The Psalm suggests that being connected to Godly community and God’s word helps us to flourish. Take a minute to imagine how this tree might look if it was planted in a desert far from water.

Exercise:

What’s one step you can take to “move your tree” closer to the streams of life God gives us? Spend some time in prayer. Imagine how a tree thirsts for water to provide strength and sustenance, ask God to create a thirst in you for community with God and his followers.

Prayer:

God, I often neglect the “streams” of community and scripture you provide to sustain me. Help me to turn toward others and your word as a source of strength and encouragement. Help us as a church to invest deeply in each other. Help us to recommit to being nourished by your word. Help Engage to become a tree that bears fruit in season and doesn’t wither. May all that we do in your name prosper for your sake and for the sake of our community.
Amen.

Ministry quickly becomes draining – whether in the pulpit or the infant room – when we start to think it’s somehow about us. When ministry becomes self-centered, either selfishly (we think it should benefit us) or unselfishly (we think it stems from our own strength, goodness, etc.) we’re sure to be disappointed. Serving God often, graciously, does benefit us – but not always, and not always in the moment. And our service *is* benefited by our strengths, talents and goodness, but if this is all we have we all too quickly find our supplies lacking.

Service to others is only rightly oriented when centered in our faith in Jesus. We love because we’ve been loved. Not because we think loving others will earn us more love. Not because we’re the best at loving people. All ministry is best centered in the hope and faith we have in Jesus’ saving work in our lives. In this position – where our lives are living in Christ, “hidden with Christ in God,” we find great freedom and hope because its here that we can believe that the same power that was at work in Jesus is also at work in us.

Passages:

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. . . . So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.
Colossians 2:6-7; and 3:1-4

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.
Ephesians 1:17-19; 2:8-10

Prayer:

God, it’s often tempting to trust in our own strength. But the end result is often discouragement. Teach us as individuals, and as a church community, what it looks like to live our lives in you. Teach us to be a community of joy in response to the grace you give us. Teach us to lives of hope and risk as we trust in your power to save. May Engage continue to be a community that clearly points to Christ. Amen.

In week 2 we read the Vine passage from John 15 where Jesus explains that his followers must remain rooted in him in order to bear fruit. Jesus then goes on to explain that part of remaining in him involves remaining in community – and not just any community, but community that reflects the love that we experience in relationship with Jesus. Jesus wants us to abide in his love and part of doing that involves loving the other “branches” as well – we can’t be connected to Jesus (the vine) and not love the other branches.

Passage:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. John 15:12-17

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:34-5

Food for Thought:

Who do you struggle to love? Be honest. Does your understanding of the way God loves you make it easier in any way to love that person?

How do you respond to Jesus’ statement, “You did not choose me but I chose you.” How does it change your view of others in your church body if you recognize that God chose them, just as he chose you to be part of Engage?

Exercise:

Talk with a trusted friend or pastor about someone you struggle to love (you can keep it anonymous if needed). Ask them to help you imagine what it might look like to love that person.

Prayer:

God, Christians are more often known by their failures to love, than by their love. Help us as we struggle to know how to love one another. Teach us more deeply what it cost you to love us. Help us to be willing to make sacrifices in order to love others. May Engage be known as a place where people are deeply loved. May we model the ministry of peace and reconciliation that our world so deeply needs. Amen.

Popular culture lost its infatuation with community not long after the sixties when it became clear that “love” wasn’t really all we needed. Anyone who dips more than a toe into genuine community – where differences aren’t swept under the rug, but are held out to the light to be dealt with – quickly finds it to be a challenging endeavor. If we’re not held together by common tastes, politics or preferences, what could possibly compel us to love one another as Christ calls us to? The following passage from Frederick Buechner’s novel *Brendan* highlights the bond that holds us together and the calling to community.

Pushing down hard with his fists on the table top he heaved himself up to where he was standing. For the first time we saw he wanted one left. It was gone from the knee joint down. He was hopping sideways to reach for his stick in the corner when he lost his balance. He would have fallen in a heap if Brendan hadn’t leapt forward and caught him.

“I’m as crippled as the dark world.” Gildas said.

“If it comes to that, which one of us isn’t, my dear?” Brendan said.

Gildas with but one leg. Brendan sure he’d misspent his whole life entirely. Me that had left my wife to follow him and buried our only boy. The truth of what Brendan said stopped all our mouths. We was cripples all of us. For a moment or two there was no sound but the bees.

“To lend each other a hand when we’re falling,” Brendan said. “Perhaps that’s the only work that matters in the end.”

Food for thought:

Christian community is based on our common need for and trust in Christ. How might this change the way you view others in the church or in your community group?

Prayer:

God, I often judge those who’re different than me. I find myself feeling threatened or hurt all too easily. Help me to remember to view others as you do – as sinners saved by grace. Thank you that Engage is a community where faults and weaknesses don’t have to be hidden. Help us to believe that as we share our deep hurts and fears, you’ll bring healing and reconciliation beyond what we could imagine. We pray that those who need you would be drawn to our church as they see us reflecting your love and grace. Amen.

Despite our best attempts, many of us live very isolated lives. Though we may have people to hang out with, few of us have friends we really trust with the deepest and most vulnerable truths of our lives. Brennan Manning describes what this deep friendship might look like in his book, *Ruthless Trust*.

Such a friend allows me to be myself . . . between us trust grows. If a word of fraternal correction is needed, the friend offers it directly, but the pained expression on his face tells me how difficult the reproof is for him. And yet he has the courage to tell me something unpleasant but necessary – something that others should tell me, but do not. . . . With each interaction, trust of my friend grows deeper.

Passages:

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:12-17

Food for Thought:

Both of these passages suggest that the way we treat one another should be a reflection of how Jesus treats us. Christ changes everything.

Prayer:

Thank you, God, for the reconciliation we experience in Jesus! Reconciliation that changes everything! Shape us into a community that models your forgiveness and deep love for us. Free us from fear and judgment. Amen.

Our Trust in God results in Renewal and Reconciliation and demands a Response. But our response may not be a welcome or easy one. Jesus' speech in John 15 reflects this truth. He begins with the vine passage – emphasizing the importance of finding our strength in him – then moves to a call to love each other as we are loved by Jesus. Jesus' speech then takes a more difficult turn (as though loving each other isn't difficult enough!) as he talks about how the world may respond to our discipleship.

Passage:

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It was to fulfill the word that is written in their law, 'They hated me without a cause.'

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

John 15:18-26

Food for Thought:

This passage seems harsh – few of us really feel hated because of our beliefs. But there are subtler ways that “the world” contradicts Jesus' call to discipleship. Think over the last few weeks of this study. What messages does the world send regarding trust, renewal in service and reconciliation?

How is God calling you to respond to him? Are you being invited to step out in trust with your time or money? To trust that healing can be found in a particular relationship? What challenges will your response face from the people around you – do you believe your response will be encouraged and supported?

It would be a mistake to assume that this passage gives us license to “hate” the world in return. Jesus in no way implies this – our stance toward the world is to be one of love and reconciliation that models Jesus' life and death.

Prayer:

Help us, God, to stand out in positive contrast to the world around us. Open our eyes to the ways in which our culture contradicts and deters our call to discipleship. Let us be a church that embodies clear and meaningful discipleship as we grow in love and sacrifice. Amen.

In Isaiah's time the "church" had gotten very distracted from its purpose. There was a heavy focus on religious ritual without moral action. People were consumed with hedonistic pursuit of wealth and comfort and would stop at nothing to get what they wanted. And yet they suffered deeply under invasion and political demise. They couldn't understand why God was letting things fall apart. Isaiah's response below serves as a corrective vision for the community.

Passage:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in. Isaiah 58:6-12

Food for thought:

What are the specific tasks God wants his people to be involved in? What results do these actions bring?

How well does Engage do in caring for those in need, both within and outside of our community? How might we need to change as a church if we want to experience God's continued blessing?

Prayer:

1. Pray that God would open our eyes to the needs in our communities of influence.
2. Pray that our giving to those in need would be multiplied.
3. Pray that we would have unity of vision as we serve our community.
4. Pray that through our sacrifice, we would be a light for our community. Pray that we might trust in God's provision and dare to embrace impossible projects of physical, relational, and spiritual Repair and Restoration in our communities.

Time to recap! Over the past 4 weeks we've asked God to help us grow in Trust, Renewal, Reconciliation, and Response. Look over the last few weeks and consider the following questions:

1. Where's God been challenging you the most through this time? What invitation to growth or change have you heard in the midst of that challenge?
2. How has this season changed the way you view Engage and the plans God has for Engage? Do you have any new sense of vision?
3. Have you experienced answers to prayers during this time? What has that been like?
4. If you met together with a friend or another group to pray, what was that like for you - did it change the experience in any way? If you end this season with some clear next steps, find someone to share these with, so they can help encourage you.

Please consider writing down some notes about your experience during the past month and sharing it with a pastor or member of the leadership team.

Prayer:

1. Thank God for any blessings you've received throughout this month.
2. Ask God to give you clarity on next steps for you personally and for Engage.
3. Pray that God would multiply the fruit of this season in the coming months.

Cheat Sheet

Here's a list of our concrete needs in the coming months (in no way conclusive!). Pray as you feel led.

Leaders:

For encouragement and renewal among current leaders.

For new leaders to be added to Leadership Team.

For wisdom and clarity as we try to provide opportunities for support and training for current leaders.

For unity in relationship and decision-making.

Ministry:

For new volunteers in all areas of ministry.

For individuals to gain a deeper sense of their gifting and to step out in faith in new areas of service.

For unity and fellowship on teams.

Finances:

For a deep sense of trust and commitment as we seek to meet the needs of year 3.

For ideas on ways to share resources, cut costs, while still maintaining a "God-sized" vision.

For a deeper sense of community to grow out of shared sacrifice and commitment.

For individuals and families to grow in financial stability and freedom.

Vision:

For clarity of vision regarding outreach and ministry within the larger community.

For clarity and unity of vision regarding Sunday mornings.

For a deeper sense of unity and freedom as we connect in smaller "missional" communities.

For a deeper understanding of the gospel and the way it shapes everything we do.

Spiritually:

For a renewed belief in and practice of prayer.

For individuals and families to be freed from addictive and sinful behaviors.

For Christ-centered community that's transformative.

For a passion for sharing the Good News.

For deepened relationship with God and trust in God.

For a commitment to and vision for long-term discipleship and service.